

The First Chinese Contract Laborers in Hawaii, 1852

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There has been conflicting information as to which part of South China the first Chinese contract laborers came from. On January 3, 1852, 195 Chinese arrived on the *Thetis* under Captain John Cass. The place of origin of the immigrants was an important factor in Hawaiian Chinese history because of dialectal and regional differences in China.

The error causing confusion occurred in the 1886 report of the Hawaiian Bureau of Immigration, which listed "Hong Kong" as the port of departure.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Name of vessel</i>	<i>From</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Nationalities</i>
Jan. 3, 1852	<i>Thetis</i>	Hong Kong	195	Chinese
Aug. 2, 1852	<i>Thetis</i>	Hong Kong	98	Chinese

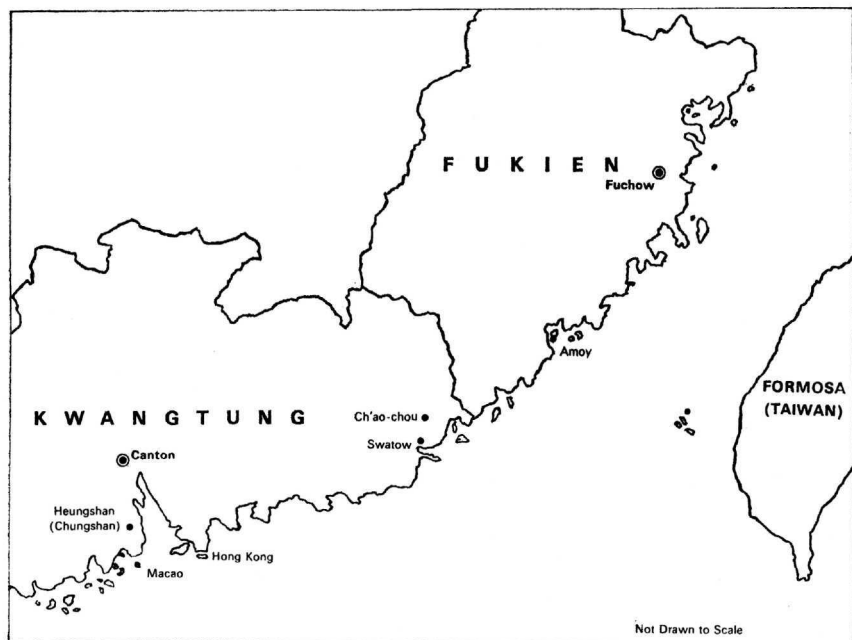
The correct entry for both January 3 and for August 2 should have been "Amoy, Fukien."

Another paper in this Journal by Professor Clarence E. Glick, who has previously written much about the Chinese in Hawaii, fully substantiates Amoy as the port of origin of these first contract laborers who came to Hawaii.¹

Besides the error in the immigration report, other conditions among the Hawaii Chinese lent credence to the wrong assumption. The provincial and regional customs and dialects of the Hong Kong, Macao, and Canton areas surrounding the Pearl River estuary were prevalent here among the early Hawaii Chinese. There are now no remnants of Fukienese organized social groups nor traces of clubhouses and regional temples, except for one cemetery. The southern Fukien (Hokkien) dialect has not been in common use among the Hawaii Chinese. In general, Chinese from the Pearl River delta were those who emigrated to Hawaii, the South Pacific, South and North America during the nineteenth century's world-wide recruitment of Chinese labor.

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Men from Amoy customarily emigrated to Nan Yang—the Southeast Asia areas known in the nineteenth century as the Philippines, Dutch East Indies, British Malaya and Straits Settlements, Siam, and French Indo-China.²



The situation in Hawaii that sent Captain John Cass to China for laborers was the imperative need for men to serve the infant sugar industry. Sugar produced for export had increased from 8,000 lbs. in 1836 to 750,238 lbs. in 1850.³ Similar to other areas of agricultural and industrial development throughout the world, Hawaii's great demand was for cheap labor to supplement or replace indigenous labor. The Hawaii sugar planters, farmers, graziers and others organized the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society and at its preliminary meeting, April 29, 1850, and during the formal meeting, August 13, 1850, discussed the problem of recruiting foreign labor. There was talk of looking to Germany and Northern Europe as good sources of labor. However, the urgency was to meet the immediate need, and China was chosen as the source because of comparative proximity and lower economic cost.⁴ Furthermore, Hawaii's agriculturists were familiar with the Chinese, because Chinese sugar planters and sugar millers were already in the Hawaiian Islands.

Reverend William Speer in writing to the Hon. Walter Lowrie, former U.S. Senator and secretary of the Presbyterian Foreign Missionary Society in Philadelphia, attested to this. He had been a missionary in Canton in 1843 and, from his subsequent post in San Francisco, had come to Hawaii for a five-month visit, April to September, 1856, to recover his health. He stayed

two months on the island of Maui with the Reverend William P. Alexander family. While on Maui and Oahu, he gave talks at Hawaiian churches and to the Chinese. He wrote:

It is a remarkable fact never before published, that the first sugar manufactured upon the Hawaiian Islands came by the hands of two Chinamen, in the year 1803. It has been ascertained by careful inquiry of some old residents that in that year, having obtained the indigenous sugar cane, they established a mill for grinding & boiling, or evaporating it, on the Island of Lanai, at the spot on the south side now occupied by the Mormons and selected as a site for the temple which they purposed building. But the factory of sweets has gone to decay. . . . Plantations have since then been carried on with better success by Chinese proprietors on Maui and Hawaii. Sugar is now one of the staple & most valuable productions of the islands.

The cultivation of silk has been attempted, though as yet without profit. With Chinese manipulators, it will probably be successful. Chinese fruits, cereals, manufactures, will be slowly introduced.⁵

The first attempt of the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society to recruit Chinese labor had met with failure. In September 1850, the Caucasian planters in Hawaii contracted with G. F. Hubertson to bring in Chinese laborers. Hubertson, a merchant recently established in Hawaii, had resided in China and was supposed to be by far the best person with whom to make a labor-import contract. He had experience in the matter and the facilities for the importation of 200 Chinese laborers. Subsequently, \$9-10,000 was advanced to Hubertson, who sailed away on his ship the *Amazon*. No word was received from him after his departure. Rumor was that after his arrival in China, "the coolies . . . were engaged," but the vessel was sold and the return voyage was abandoned for reasons unknown.⁶ Both the money and labor were lost to the sugar planters in Hawaii.

The matter continued to be urgent. Judge William L. Lee, president of the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society, said in his report of August 11, 1851, "More labor we must have; and it is clear we cannot depend on the islands for an increase. It only remains then, for us to look abroad. . . ." The sugar planters made another attempt. This time they made a new contract with Captain John Cass of the British bark *Thetis*, in port at Honolulu. He sailed for China from Honolulu on August 12, 1851.

This flurry of interest caused an agent to advertise in the August 23, 1851 *Polynesian*, eleven days after the departure of the *Thetis*:

For Hong Kong, the A1 British Bark Athole, 400 tons, Capt. A. Black, Commander, has lofty between decks and is well adapted for the bringing of Coolies to these islands. Will sail about the 20th inst. and will return direct should sufficient inducement offer.

F. R. Vida

Evidently this offer was not taken.

How Cass gathered the Chinese in Amoy is not known. Was word sent throughout the countryside to attract laborers? Were some attracted from south of the Kwangtung-Fukien border in Chao-chou Prefecture that has Swatow as seaport? It has not been determinable whether any or all were seeking ways out from the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) which embroiled the peasantry of South China in what was the beginning of the Revolutionary

Movement. Or, had Chinese port drifters been lured aboard with promises of great economic opportunities in Paradise?

The *Polynesian*, semi-official weekly, on January 10, 1852, reported the arrival of this first group of contract laborers on the *Thetis* under Captain Cass, returning

. . . to this port a few days since from Amoy, China, with a cargo of Coolies most of whom were contracted for by planters and others at the islands. . . . The coolies were readily engaged for five years, at \$36 per annum, in addition to their passage, food, clothing, and house. An advance of six dollars each was made them in China, to be refunded in small instalments out of the wages of the men, after their arrival. The passage was accomplished, with the loss of but four or five men in 55 days. In addition to the laborers brought, under contract, there was room in the ship for about 20 more, which was occupied by that number of boys, who have been readily engaged by residents here for five years as house and other servants.⁷

To add further to the confusion, there was also a new item in the same paper stating that Robert C. Wyllie, Minister of Foreign Relations, had sent on to His Majesty—Kauikeaouli, King Kamehameha III—a gift with the statement: "I have the honor to transmit herewith a portrait of H. E. Keying, Imperial Commissioner and Governor General of the Kwangs [Kwangtung and Kwangsi provinces]." The Hawaiian Kingdom and the Chinese Empire had no formal treaty relations, but the Chinese provincial government made the gesture of goodwill.

In the "Marine Journal" section of the *Polynesian*, Jan. 31, 1852, was the entry, "Arrived Jan. 3—British bark, *Thetis*, 51 days from Amoy." And there was also an advertisement, "Furniture and silk goods ex *Thetis* from China. For Sale by A. P. Everett." Captain Cass also brought in new plants: pomelo, *wong pee*, *longan*, Mandarin oranges, *kumquat*, *lichee*, and finger citron.

Much credit was given to Captain Cass for the faithful manner in which he carried out the experiment of introducing contract laborers. Another contract was made with Cass to bring in a hundred more Chinese, which he did, arriving in Hawaii on August 2, 1852 with 98, two having died on the way.

Stephen Reynolds for his June 1852 report of the Committee on Labor stated:

Since our last meeting, the ship *Thetis* has arrived [January 3, 1852] from Amoy, China, with about two hundred Coolies, which were distributed among the planters, as by contract entered into with the master, John Cass, before sailing from Honolulu. They have proved, thus far, diligent, but not swift; obedient, but require looking after.⁸

That they required "looking after" was also the feeling of the Reverend Speer who tried to explain that these men were different from the Chinese already here. On May 2, 1856, he wrote:

As laborers, the Coolies, being mostly Amoy people, are a turbulent, stubborn, reckless class sometimes resisting overseers or employers, threatening to kill them or to commit suicide, quarreling with each other & with the Canton people, smoking opium, gambling & secretly stealing. Some of the whites treat them harshly, but generally Christians exhibit anxiety to deal with them justly, exercise forbearance & kindnesses, pass such laws as may check their bad conduct & yet not oppress them, & put in train influences tending to their improvement and conversion to Christianity. There must be a blessing in store for the Chinese in the Sandwich islands.⁹

By 1857, when their contracts were fulfilled, the men began to "congregate in and around Honolulu, where they are to be seen, prowling about, at all hours of the night, without limit, or restraint," causing B. F. Snow, ships chandler and business man, and seventy other foreign residents to appeal to the King in Privy Council to enforce a curfew. The council replied that the Vagrant Act could take care of the matter.¹⁰

Some of the difficulties arose because of dialectal differences between the Chinese already here and these contract laborers. The Reverend Speer wrote in his article, "The Chinese in the Sandwich Islands, No. I," in *The Friend*, May 1856:

The people of different parts of the Chinese Empire differ much in physical appearance, in their spoken dialects, and in disposition. The written language, the general employments, the forms and customs, and the religion, are almost the same, however, everywhere. Here, you find natives of the two provinces of Kwangtung, or Canton, and Fukien; there are at least two widely different dialects; and the earlier immigrants, now chiefly shopkeepers and servants, are liked better than those brought more recently under the name of "coolies."

Reverend Speer also said the "Canton" men and the "Amoy" men found it easier to communicate in the native Hawaiian tongue which was learned with facility for practical communication.

Thus, the Fukien men brought to Hawaii by Captain Cass had their difficulties. Many preferred to return home at the end of their contract while others chose to settle in Hawaii. Later others of Fukien came, but in scattered numbers.

The January 31, 1852 issue of *Polynesian* listed words in the Fukien dialect, as words "likely to be in common use, in communicating with the natives of that province lately imported." However, today in Hawaii there are few who can speak or understand this southern Fukien dialect.

The people of Kwangtung province are generally called Cantonese. The three principal dialectal groups in this province are known as Cantonese, Hakka, and Hoklo (Hokkien or Fukien men). The Cantonese commonly use the speech of the provincial capital, Canton, although they may speak their own subdialect at home or among themselves. The Chinese immigrants in Hawaii are principally from Heungshan district, now known as Chungshan district, speak Cantonese, and identify themselves as Punti (early occupants or old timers). Those who chose the identity of Hakka ("guest people," later occupants, newcomers) live in various districts of Kwangtung Province. The third principal dialectal group of Kwangtung Province call themselves Hoklo or Chao-chou. Their speech is like that of the Amoy area in southern Fukien. When other Hoklo immigrants from the northern part of Kwangtung, near Swatow, came to Hawaii, they naturally formed closer relations with those of their own dialect, the Amoy men.

It is interesting to note that the Lung Doo subdialectal group of the Punti in Heungshan district identify their speech as of Fukienese origin, too. Their ancestral records show their southward migration was from Fukien into the Kwangtung.¹¹ However, men of this group do not call themselves Hoklo.

In Chinese cemeteries in the Hawaiian Islands, a few gravestones show the Hoklo identity carved on headstones. In Honolulu itself, one cemetery in Pauoa Valley is for the Hoklo group. It is known as the Hook Chu Cemetery. This cemetery is for those of the **Hookien** (Hokkien)—**Chuchow** (spelling variation for Chao-chou Prefecture) groups. Land was purchased by Hook Chu & Co. on March 18, 1872.¹² This cemetery is significant in Hawaii's history because there lies buried Lee Shak, better known as Lee (surname) Akaka (1830–1920), among whose grandchildren is the Rev. Abraham Akaka of Kawaiahao Church. There are also tombstones for his Hawaiian-Chinese wife, Hiwaulu (1857–1939), and her Chinese father, Ah Kay (1821–1919), and Hawaiian mother, Kaimahuna (1838–1888). In studying these dates, one wonders whether Ah Kay came on either trip of the *Thetis*. Another headstone was for Akong (1827–1879) whose obituary notice in *The Friend* of March 1879 said he was 51 years old and proprietor of the International Hotel. There are older burials without markers, according to the Rev. Akaka's father, Kahikinaokala Akaka (1885—) who takes care of Hook Chu Cemetery's affairs.

Enough immigrants of the Hook Chu group were in Hawaii in the 1850s to cause concern for their welfare by the missionaries in Hawaii. Reverend Speer suggested in 1856 to the Hawaiian Bible Society that a Chinese colporteur or "Bible Man" be brought "from the neighborhood of Amoy, speaking the same dialect with most of the Chinese amongst us. . . ."¹³ "A subscription of six hundred dollars was commenced on the spot," and the Rev. Speer was authorized to write to Amoy, "the neighborhood from whence two-thirds of these immigrants had come."¹⁴ There are no records to show that a colporteur was hired from Amoy by the Hawaii mission group.

Later, in 1868, a locally converted Christian, S. P. Aheong (Siu Pheong), became the first Chinese colporteur employed by the Hawaii Evangelical Society. He gave talks to Chinese on Maui and Oahu and passed out religious tracts and books. He also started some schools for Chinese laborers on Maui. He said he had come as a contract laborer. He, with Hawaiian wife and two small sons, eventually returned to Chao Yan (Chao-An), the main town of Chao-chou Prefecture. He died there and his family returned to Hawaii.¹⁵ His wife, Naukana Hikiau, and most of his children were buried at Makiki Christian Cemetery in the Lucas plot. His daughter Louise had married William Lucas. She was once principal of Pauoa School in Honolulu.¹⁶ S. P. Aheong, by computation of dates he gave, was among the earlier contract laborers in Hawaii.

Complete confirmation of Amoy as the port of departure for the first Chinese contract laborers has been found in two sources, the Public Records Office, London, as described in the following paper by Dr. Clarence Glick, and in the *Hong Kong Register* and *The Friend of China and Hong Kong Gazette*. Shipping notices in various issues for 1851 and 1852 reveal that the *Thetis* was in Amoy from September 21 to November 6, 1851, and again from May 8 to June 5, 1852. Before making the second trip to Amoy, the *Thetis* did stop at Hong Kong, but delayed taking any contract laborers until Amoy, probably to save the heavy cost of lodging and feeding the men during an extended

stopover, and to decrease the chance of illness. Captain Cass was to be paid only for those accepted in good physical condition upon arrival in Honolulu.¹⁷ Of the 100 he started out with from Amoy, he lost two who died at sea. As the *Polynesian* pointed out on January 7, 1852, Cass by his "judicial management has proved himself well adapted to the business in which he is engaged."

NOTES

- ¹ Clarence E. Glick, retired from Department of Sociology, University of Hawaii, has published widely on the subject of Overseas Chinese, among those pertinent to this paper are: "The Chinese Migrant in Hawaii: A Study in Accommodation" (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, diss. 1938) and "The Relation between Position and Status in the Assimilation of Chinese in Hawaii," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. CLVII, March 1942, pp. 667-679.
- ² C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Southern Expansion of the Chinese People* (New York, 1972), p. 147.
- ³ Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom, 1778-1854* (Honolulu, 1968), p. 315.
- ⁴ RHAS *Transactions*, 1850, p. 329.
- ⁵ Speer to Lowrie, Sept. 27, 1856. We acknowledge with gratitude permission to use by the Presbyterian Historical Society of Philadelphia which kindly sent copies of two Speer to Lowrie letters. These will in future be available at Hawaii State Archives.
- ⁶ RHAS *Transactions*, 1851, p. 91.
- ⁷ A Chinese, Lee Tam (Tamaha), who for 21 years was the faithful servant of Thomas Waterhouse, died on March 16 as noted in *F.*, April, 1873. However, there is no record to show that he did come with the first group of 175 plantation laborers and 20 domestic servants on the *Thetis*, January 3, 1852.
- ⁸ RHAS *Transactions*, 1852, p. 69.
- ⁹ Speer to Lowrie, May 2, 1856.
- ¹⁰ FO & EX, March 5, 1857, P. C. Petitions.
- ¹¹ Ezra F. Vogel, *Canton under Communism: Programs and Politics in a Provincial Capital* (Cambridge, 1969); on use of the term "Hoklo," see Lo Hsiang-lin, *A Historical Survey of the Lan-Fang Presidential (Kongsi) System in Western Borneo* (Hong Kong, 1961, in Chinese); and *Lung Doo Benevolent Society* (Honolulu, 1966).
- ¹² HBC, 34:317, por. Kul. 1121 & R.P. 310, TK 2-2-12-108.
- ¹³ *F.*, June, 1856, p. 46.
- ¹⁴ Speer to Lowrie, Sept. 27, 1856.
- ¹⁵ HMCS, Aheong File; Hawaiian Consuls to Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai, 1873-1900, FOLB (typed copies), vol. 10; FO & EX, 1879.
- ¹⁶ HSB, Oct. 31, 1938, p. 3, c. 8.
- ¹⁷ Rev. Samuel C. Damon, *Sailor's Magazine* (monthly published by American Seamen's Friend Society, NYC), August 10, 1852: "A few days since the second Cooly cargo was landed at Honolulu, numbering 98 Amoy Chinamen who are to be scattered abroad as laborers upon our coffee and sugar plantations, and as domestic servants. . . ." The master of the vessel received \$50 for each laborer's passage plus \$10 for the advance he had made for money and clothing to each contracted laborer.